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Language use in business and commerce in Poland

Summary / Streszczenie: Użycie języka w biznesie i handlu w Polsce

W Polsce używanie w wewnętrznej komunikacji języka innego niż polski zależy głównie od zasięgu działania firmy. Języka innego niż polski używa się równie często w firmach przemysłu ciężkiego, bankowości, handlu, marketingu, a nawet na wyższych szczeblach zarządzania w mediach masowych. W firmach działających na terytorium Polski, ale mających swoją centralę za granicą w którymś z krajów nieanglomownych, częstym zjawiskiem jest używanie w komunikacji wewnętrznej trzech języków: angielskiego, polskiego i języka “centrali”, którym najczęściej jest język niemiecki, znacznie rzadziej francuski i hiszpański.

Języka innego niż polski używa się w biznesie i handlu z następującą motywacją: są rynki lokalne, do których obsługi nadają się języki lokalne (jak język polski), i jest rynek globalny, na którym się mówi po angielsku (albo co najmniej według wzorów angielskich).

W Polsce zakres obligatoryjnego używania języka polskiego określa ustawa o języku polskim. Od 1 maja 2004 r. obowiązek jego używania ograniczony został do komunikowania się firmy z konsumentem (B2C). Powszechny obowiązek używania języka polskiego w komunikacji B2C dotyczy informacji o właściwościach towarów i usług w ofertach, na opakowaniach i w reklamie. Kontrolę używania języka polskiego w tym zakresie sprawuje Urząd Ochrony Konkurencji i Konsumentów, Inspekcja Handlowa oraz rzecznik konsumentów.

1. Historical background

The problem of using a language other than Polish in commerce and industry appeared in Poland only in the beginning of the 90s of the last century. Until that time, the Polish language was used exclusively in both these fields within the territory of the Republic of Poland, except for international trade or – to present it more broadly – for any contacts with foreign countries. And in the foreign trade and economic cooperation with foreign countries, the languages of Poland's foreign trade partners of that time (the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia, among others) were used (aside from the English language) as auxiliary languages as well as the languages of marketing and advertising abroad.

After World War II the most important economic partner of Poland was the Soviet Union with the Russian language. The significance and position of the Russian language in the international cooperation of Poland at that time used to be much larger than it would appear from the Soviet Union's share in the foreign trade of Poland, because Russian was the working language of the Comecon whose members, apart from Poland, included other Central-European countries, among them the most important – after the Soviet Union – economic partners of Poland: Czechoslovakia and the GDR. This situation has changed diametrically after 1990: due to the aspirations of Poland – liberated from the Soviet hegemony – Germany, France and Italy moved to the top of the list of Poland's economic partners (see the table below).

The table shows that in the beginning of the 90s, Germany took the role of the first partner of Poland in the foreign trade from the Soviet Union. One would be mistaken

to think, however, that since 1990 the German language has replaced Russian. It did not happen because at the same time the English language had already dominated the international commercial contacts of Western European companies. This applies also to such flagship German economic entities as the Deutsche Bank.

Specification	First partner	Share (in %)	Second partner	Share (in %)	Third partner	Share (in %)
1938 Imports	Germany	14,5	USA	12,2	UK	11,4
1938 Exports	UK	18,2	Germany	14,5	Sweden	6,0
1950 Imports	USSR	28,8	Czechoslovakia	13,2	GDR	11,5
1950 Exports	USSR	24,3	GDR	13,9	Czechoslovakia	9,2
1960 Imports	USSR	31,2	GDR	12,5	Czechoslovakia	8,5
1960 Exports	USSR	29,4	GDR	9,4	Czechoslovakia	8,5
1970 Imports	USSR	37,7	GDR	11,1	Czechoslovakia	8,6
1970 Exports	USSR	35,3	GDR	9,3	Czechoslovakia	7,5
1980 Imports	USSR	33,1	FRG	6,7	GDR	6,6
1980 Exports	USSR	31,2	FRG	8,1	Czechoslovakia	6,9
1992 Imports	Germany	23,9	Russian Fed.	8,5	Italy	6,9
1992 Exports	Germany	31,4	Netherlands	6,0	Italy	5,6
1995 Imports	Germany	26,6	Italy	8,5	Russian Fed.	6,7
1995 Exports	Germany	38,3	Netherlands	5,6	Russian Fed.	5,6
2000 Imports	Germany	23,9	Russian Fed.	9,4	Italy	8,3
2000 Exports	Germany	34,9	Italy	6,3	France	5,2
2005 Imports	Germany	24,7	Russian Fed.	8,9	Italy	7,1
2005 Exports	Germany	28,2	France	6,2	Italy	6,1
2007 Imports	Germany	24,1	Russian Fed.	8,7	China	7,1
2007 Exports	Germany	25,9	Italy	6,6	France	6,1

Table 1: Structure of the foreign trade turnover of Poland by main trading partners in 1950-2005 (in %).

Source: Yearbook of Foreign Trade Statistics 2008. Central Statistical Office. Warsaw 2008.

On the threshold of the 90s, almost all of Polish industry, commerce, media and banks were in the hands of the state or the local governments. And since 1945, the “decree on the state language and the working language of government and self-government administrative authorities” was formally binding. In accordance with this decree, all “government and self-government authorities and offices”, including companies in the business and commerce sector, should have worked using the Polish language. Meanwhile, since the beginning of the 90s, the process of privatization and reprivatization of the whole economy has begun in Poland. The state sold individual factories and companies to private buyers. As the purchasers of those objects were usually Western European or American entities, agreements of sale were drawn up also in a foreign language and sometimes **only** in a foreign language, which was obviously at odds with the spirit and the letter of the decree on the state language.

The Supreme Chamber of Control became interested in this issue. In 1996, a report concerning the use of Polish as the state language in operations of entities controlled in 1992-1996 was prepared by this institution. Inspections revealed glaring examples of documents (in the majority of cases, this concerned the agreements of sale) being drawn up by the state offices exclusively in foreign languages. A suspicion arose that an exclusively foreign form of at least some of the agreements made it possible to conceal certain terms of those agreements, unfavourable to the Polish party. The findings of these inspections contributed, to a considerable degree, to the passing of the Act on the Polish language in 1999.

2. Current state of affairs

Today the use of a language other than Polish in internal communication does not depend on the sector of economy or the size of the company but chiefly on the scope of operation and the ownership relations (they decide which foreign language is used). Languages other than Polish are equally often used in heavy industry, banking, trade, marketing, even in mass media companies. Although the use of a language other than Polish occurs much more frequently in large rather than small companies, it results from the fact that large supranational as well as international companies are seldom Polish firms, while they are often parts of large international concerns. Practical reasons usually determine the use of a foreign language within the company: if non-Polish speaking representatives of foreign shareholders sit on the supervisory board and its Polish members know a given foreign language, the talks are held in this foreign language, most often in English, even if the company has its registered headquarters in a non-English speaking country.

In companies operating within the territory of Poland, but having their headquarters abroad, in one of the non-English speaking countries, it frequently occurs that three languages are used in the internal communication: English, Polish and the language of the “central office”, usually German, less often: French and Spanish.

In Poland, no research is conducted on the perceptions and attitudes of the employees or trade unions regarding the issue of language use within companies. At least in the media, there is no evidence of internal conflicts, between the employees (and trade unions, as their advocates) and the management of the company, concerning the language.

On the one hand, an atmosphere of kind social approval for the spontaneous use of foreign names in commerce and services in the borderland can be noticed and advertisements written solely in English or German are administratively tolerated, on the other – there are citizens' complaints to the Ministry of Culture or Polish Language Council about foreign-language job offers printed in journals and magazines, even about using foreign-language names of positions (like *corporate dealer*, *operation manager*, *project manager*, *account manager*, etc.) in Polish-language recruitment advertisements.¹

¹ However, psychological research confirms social credibility and a higher social prestige of foreign-language texts (English, French, German) in comparison with Polish ones. It applies also to the phenomenon of an informal and formal higher hierarchy (rating), in the academic environment, of a

The main job requirements, specified in recruitment advertisements, may be taken for a reliable indication of the position of individual foreign languages in commerce and business in Poland. Tens or even hundreds of such advertisements are published in special supplements or sections in the leading national dailies. Those advertisements are roughly divided by editorial teams according to sectors of economy and social life. From such editorial practices, one can easily conclude that the saturation of particular sectors with advertisements seeking employees with a knowledge of foreign languages is very diverse and ranges from zero (there is no requirement to know a foreign language in the offers of the public administration sector!) to 95% (almost every job offer in the management staff sector requires the knowledge of at least one foreign language).

The analysis of job offers indicates that the choice of a foreign language used in individual companies depends not that much on the sorts of products or services but rather on the registered headquarters of the main shareholder, in the sense that the majority of offers requiring knowledge of the German language come from German firms. For every 100 offers requiring the knowledge of any foreign language, 68 require the knowledge of the English language and 19 – the knowledge of German. The requirement to know a language other than English, German and Polish appears very seldom in job offers.

I am not familiar with any spectacular examples where the success or failure of a company in Poland was determined by its internal use of a language. However, the success of certain Polish companies (especially abroad, e.g. in Germany) is attributed to their names, suggesting their non-Polishness (e.g. *Gino Rossi*, *Simple*, *Monari*, *Tatum*, *Diverse*). On the other hand, one can come across suggestions that one of the factors contributing to the failure of a new magazine was its foreign-language name (e.g. *Glamour*, *Marie Claire*, *Votre Beauté*).

3. Legal conditions

The use of the Polish language in public activities and legal transactions on the territory of the Republic of Poland is regulated by the Act on the Polish language of October 7th, 1999. According to this Act, until May 1st 2004, i.e. until the moment of Poland's accession to the European Union: the Polish language should have been “used in legal transactions made on the territory of the Republic of Poland when at least one of the parties thereto is a Polish entity”. That should have applied “in particular to names of goods or services, offers, advertisements, manuals, information on qualities of goods or services, terms of guarantee, invoices, bills and receipts”. These regulations were changed, in regard to their content and application, on May 1st, 2004: since then the obligation to use the Polish language has been limited to the business-to-consumer (B2C) communication. As far as the internal communication is concerned (as well as the “B2B” communication), the Polish language should still be used by Polish entities entrusted with public tasks and controlled by the state, local governments, and territorial agencies of public administration.

text published in a language other than Polish. The appeal of foreign languages is used in marketing and advertising, especially in the naming of Polish companies, proper names of products as well as in advertising catchphrases (compare the slogan “Japan Beauty”, created by a Polish company to be used in a promotion of a Japanese automobile, *Suzuki Liana*, in Poland).

The obligation to use the Polish language “applies in particular to warnings and information for consumers [...], manuals and information on qualities of goods and services”. Information on qualities of goods and services should be expressed in Polish also in advertisements.

The control of the Polish language use is exercised by the Office for Competition and Consumer Protection, Commercial Inspectorate and the consumer ombudsman. In April 2004, the Supreme Chamber of Control published its report “on the results of control of the realization of the Act on the Polish language”, based on its own research from the years 2001-2003. This research concerned also the question of the Polish language use in descriptions of goods and services. The following conclusions from this research were included in the report:

1. [...] From the beginning of 2001 to the middle of 2003, the Commercial Inspectorate carried out [...] 39082 (55.3% inspections in total) inspections concerning the observance of the Act on the Polish language. The inspections revealed 2260 cases of infringement of the Act on the Polish language, consisting in, among other things, a lack of Polish-language names and descriptions of products and a lack of translation of manuals and maintenance instructions into Polish. [...] In 1552 cases, motions for punishment for the offence under article 15 of the Act on the Polish language were filed. As a result of these motions, 1296 persons were punished, including 1254 punished with a fine.

Furthermore:

2. Provincial inspectors of the Commercial Inspectorate issued, upon the requests of customs authorities, 169 opinions in cases concerning the introduction of products without the required Polish-language labels into the Polish customs territory.

The Supreme Chamber of Control assessed negatively the observance of the Act on the Polish language by the majority of large format retail centers in which substantial, intensifying irregularities in the Polish language use in business trade were revealed.

Control testing revealed substantial irregularities related to the non-compliance with the Act on the Polish language in 40 out of 48 large format retail centers controlled (83,3%).

The revealed irregularities consisted mainly in a lack of translation into Polish of certain information contained in the original text, including: the name of foodstuff type, method of preparation or use, storage conditions, notices preceding the minimum shelf-life or best before date, all ingredients occurring in the foodstuff, qualities of the product, warning notices. Presenting the Polish-language version of the text as secondary to the foreign-language text by using a smaller font has also been found.

And finally the Supreme Chamber of Control concluded:

The results of the control indicate that the Polish language does not have an equal position with foreign languages in business trade. The aim of the Act, described by the legislator as the protection of the Polish language status as the state language and a national cultural asset has not been fully achieved.

Every two years the Polish Language Council prepares a “report on the state of the protection of the Polish language”. These reports – presented to the Polish Parliament – take into account, among other things, the adherence to the provisions of the Act on the Polish language in the scope of the Polish language use in commerce with consumer participation. While the research conducted for these reports does not indicate distinct changes for the better as far as Polish descriptions and instructions on products in retail trade are concerned, it is hard to say how the situation would look if there were no relevant regulations at all.

It is extremely difficult to obtain credible and representative data about the reach and scope of the use of languages other than Polish for internal communication in individual companies. However, it is obvious that many companies in Poland wouldn't be able to operate, if they had to restrict themselves to Polish in their internal communication.

As the research conducted recently in Poland proves, in the internal communication and the non-consumer (B2B) communication, languages other than Polish are used by the Polish business people with the following self justification: there are local markets, for the handling of which local languages (like the Polish language) are suitable and there is the global market in which English is spoken (or at least English language patterns are used).